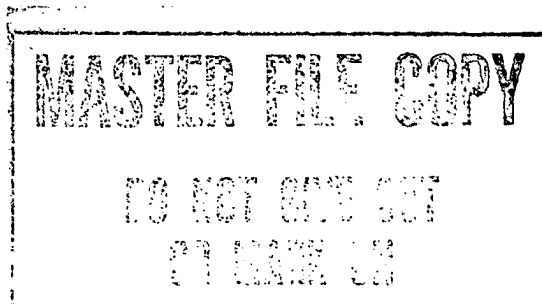




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Bangladesh: Implications of Explosive Population Growth

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A Research Paper

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NESA 83-10348
December 1983

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Bangladesh: Implications of Explosive Population Growth

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A Research Paper

This paper was prepared by [redacted]
[redacted] Office of Near Eastern and South
Asian Analysis. It was coordinated with the
Directorate of Operations. [redacted]

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Comments and queries are welcome and may be
directed to the Chief, South Asia Division, NESA, on

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December 1983*

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**Bangladesh:
Implications of Explosive
Population Growth**

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Key Judgments

*Information available
as of 6 December 1983
was used in this report.*

Continued high population growth will make Bangladesh's already severe social and economic problems virtually intractable and contribute to the country's chronic political instability:

- By the turn of the century, Bangladesh will add about 65 million persons to its population to reach approximately 162 million.
- Overcrowding and unemployment in urban areas already have resulted in problems that are open to exploitation by opposition politicians, some of whom receive Soviet backing.
- The government will risk alienating the politically powerful rural elite if it endorses land reform measures needed to combat rising poverty and landlessness among peasants.
- The continuing flow of economic refugees to India and potential migration to Pakistan and Burma are likely to become increasingly sensitive issues in Bangladesh's foreign relations. All three countries have their own population and communal concerns as well as budget constraints, and none will voluntarily accept Bangladeshi migrants, whether Hindus, Muslims, or Buddhists.
- In a worst case scenario—a mass exodus to India precipitated by internal conditions—New Delhi would intervene, perhaps drawing other countries into conflict and complicating Washington's efforts to maintain stability in the region.

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Although President Ershad is committed to controlling population growth, his government will face political risks in attempting to overcome cultural and social barriers to a successful family planning program.

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Foreign donors of funding and technical assistance to Bangladesh's population control programs, including the United States (whose current contribution is about \$25 million), will have to provide sustained support for many more years before population growth is brought under control.

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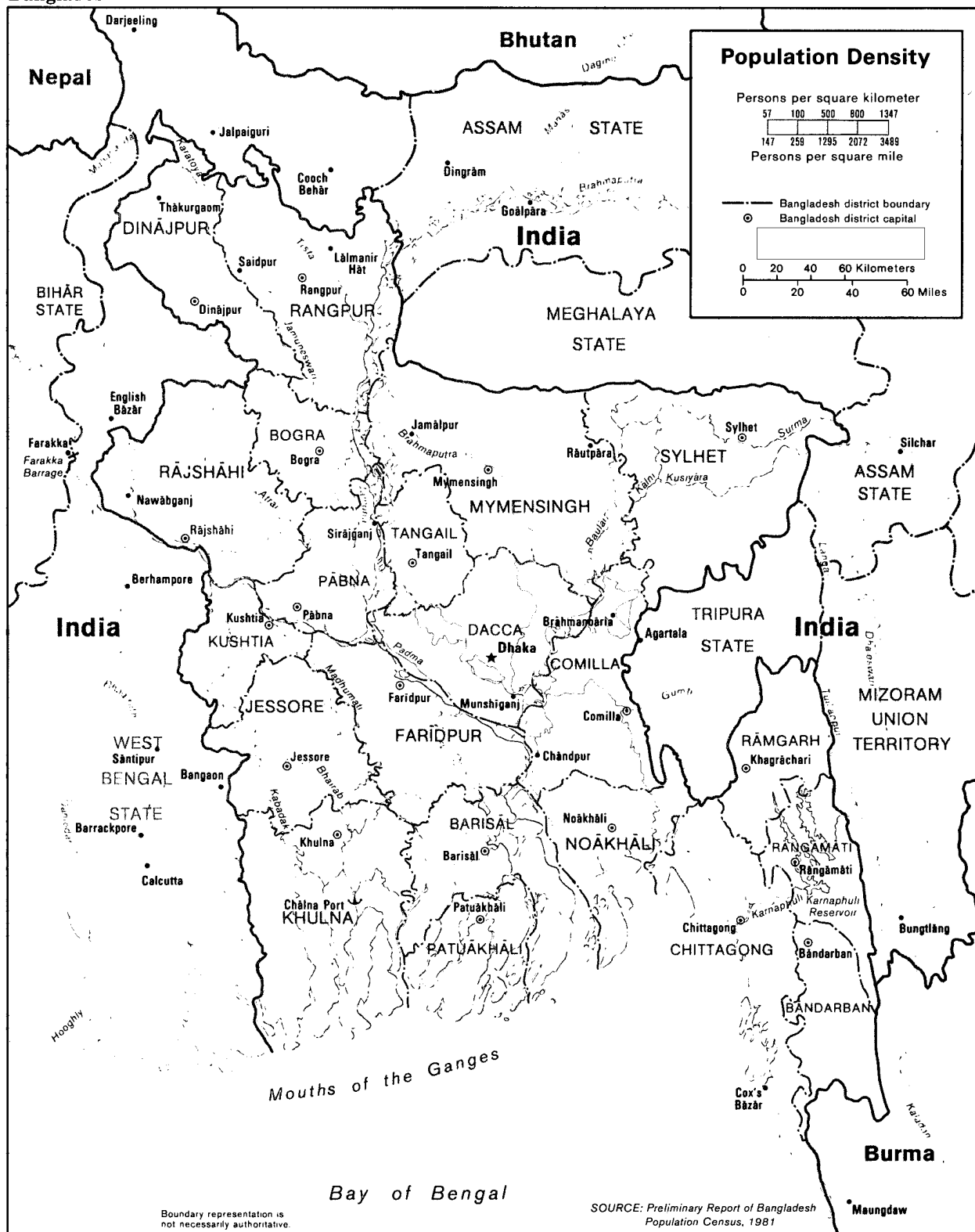
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Bangladesh: Implications of Explosive Population Growth

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The imbalance between a large, rapidly growing population and the meager financial resources available to meet basic needs has created nearly intractable problems for Bangladesh since independence in 1971. Rapid population growth undermines regime efforts to establish social stability, equity, and improved living standards for the population and constrains future social and economic development (table 1).

Four major demographic problems that plague Bangladesh today, and which will be even more pronounced in the future, are:

- *High population growth.* Family planning efforts intended to achieve a decline in fertility and lower the rate of population growth have been ineffective. The program has suffered from a lack of administrative continuity, and the key to invigorating the program has so far been elusive.
- *Rural crowding.* More marginal agricultural land must be used as the rural population increases. Because the peasantry will be forced to occupy less productive land, the already vast economic gulf between the masses living in poverty and the rural elite will widen.
- *Urban problems.* Only 11 percent of the population lives in cities now, but the rate of urban growth is on the upswing. Bangladesh's cities will face steadily mounting needs for housing, transportation, water and sewer systems, and food.
- *Unemployment.* Widespread unemployment and underemployment in both rural and urban areas will be compounded by the addition of nearly 19 million people to the labor pool during the 1980s.

Rapid Population Growth: The Crux of the Problem

Population growth will remain a fundamental issue driving both domestic policies and Dhaka's relations

Table 1
Demographic and Education Estimates
for Bangladesh, India, and Pakistan

	Bangladesh	India	Pakistan
Population Estimates, 1983			
Population	96,500,000	740,009,000	94,780,000
Population growth rate, 1982-83 (percent)	3.1	2.2	2.8
Crude birth rate (per 1,000 population)	49	35	44
Crude death rate (per 1,000 population)	18	13	15
Infant mortality rate (per 1,000 live births)	146	118	125
Life expectancy at birth (years)	49	52	53
Percentage under 15 years old	44	38	43
Urban population	10,000,000	175,000,000	28,000,000
Percentage urban	11	24	29
Education estimates, 1980			
Literacy (percent)	26	36	24
Number enrolled in school as percentage of age group			
Primary (6 to 11)	62	76	57
Secondary (12 to 17)	15	28	15
Higher education (20 to 24)	3	9	2

with the United States, which is the country's second-largest source of bilateral aid (\$200 million in 1981). The provision of basic necessities—food, housing, education, and jobs—will be a major concern for the leadership of Bangladesh, in our opinion, as it seeks to retain effective control of the burgeoning population.

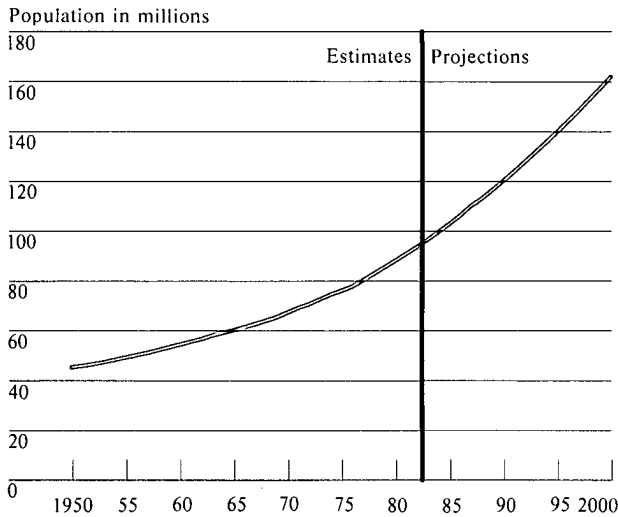
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Figure 1
Bangladesh: Estimated and Projected
Population, 1950-2000

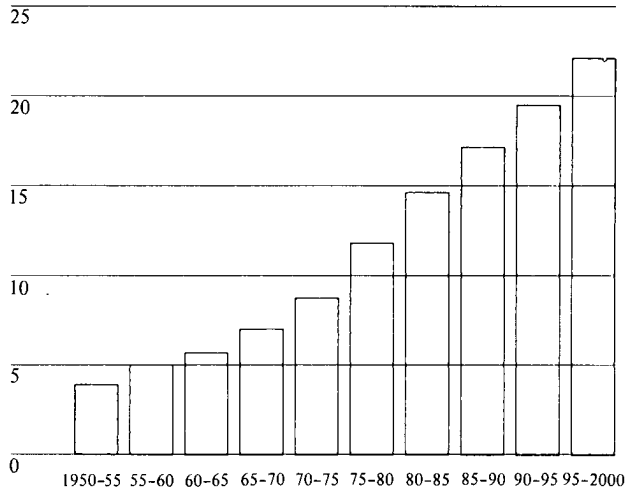


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We believe that the explosive population growth, currently estimated at 3.1 percent annually by the US Census Bureau, will continue with only slight abatement well into the next century.¹ The estimated population for 1983 is 96.5 million, making Bangladesh, which is about the size of Wisconsin in land area, the eighth most populous country in the world. Just over 2.9 million people were added to the population in the past year, the fifth-largest addition among all countries, trailing only India, China, Indonesia, and Brazil. The US Census Bureau projects a decline in the annual growth rate to a still high 2.9 percent by 2000 when the projected population will reach about 162 million, more than double Bangladesh's population at independence in 1971 (figures 1 and 2). Even if the population grows at the lower rate of 2.5 percent annually, estimated by the US Embassy, the projected population will reach 144 million by the year 2000.

¹ There are variations in the estimates for the current and projected population of Bangladesh, depending largely on the analysis of the current level of fertility and its assumed future path. Estimates for the 1983 population range from 93.6 million to 97.5 million and, for the 2000 population, between 137.1 million and 165.7 million.

Figure 2
Bangladesh: Additions to the
Population During Each Five-Year
Interval, 1950-2000
Million persons



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Past uncontrolled population growth already has made Bangladesh one of the world's most impoverished nations:

- Per capita income, according to the US Embassy in Dhaka, currently is only \$120. The Embassy estimates that 60 percent of the population lives below the poverty line as defined by the World Bank.
- Despite a modest rise in net production of food-grains since the early 1960s, government nutrition surveys show a decline in per capita calorie consumption, particularly in rural areas.
- The United Nations estimated that in 1981 about 7 million additional housing units were needed in order to fill the minimum needs of the existing population.

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- Overpopulation and malnutrition contribute to the persistence of communicable diseases spread widely by inadequate sanitation, contaminated water sources, and overcrowding, according to the United Nations.
- The government is hard pressed to provide education to the rapidly growing population. Official government data show that, while the number of primary school students increased by nearly 5 percent during 1980-83, the number of schools increased by only about 2 percent, and the number of teachers declined by more than 6 percent. About 75 percent of the population is illiterate, according to the World Bank, and only 5 percent of the population has a high school education or better.

The Rural Population: Haves and Have-Nots

We believe that rising landlessness, a direct result of the rural overcrowding brought on by three decades of rapid population growth, is a major immediate problem for the government (see table 2 and figure 3). Recent Embassy reporting indicates that opposition politicians are trying for the first time to organize the masses of rural poor, who staged demonstrations this fall to demand food and work from the government.

We believe that, while the Bangladesh leadership devotes much public attention to the problem of rural poverty, it is at least equally concerned about maintaining support among the rural elites who are its main political base. The planned rural development will be slow in meeting the basic needs of the rural poor for health care, upgraded housing, sanitation facilities, and schooling. In our view, the government's strategy to achieve foodgrain self-sufficiency by 1985-86 through capital-intensive production benefits large landowners in the long run, even though small farmers have been quick to adopt new technologies. We believe that land reform measures that would benefit the most disadvantaged segments of rural society will be resisted strongly by the rural elites and,

Bangladesh's Rural Poverty: The Scope of the Problem

The United Nations estimates that at least half of the rural 90 percent of the population lives in abject poverty, unable to acquire even the minimum daily caloric requirement. Thirty years of rapid and rising population growth have strained the ability of Bangladesh's countryside to provide food and livelihood for the population:

- *Bangladesh is the most crowded agricultural nation in the world. With about 680 persons per square kilometer in 1983, its population density is exceeded only by those of commerce-based city-states like Hong Kong and Singapore.* 25X1
 - *Landholdings are increasingly fragmented. Under civil law, individual landholdings are limited to 13.5 hectares, and Islamic customary law entitles every heir to a share of the estate.*
 - *According to the 1977 Survey of Land Occupancy, about 78 percent of rural households are effectively landless, either without land at all or less than the 0.8 hectare the World Bank reports is barely sufficient for subsistence-level farming.* 25X1
 - *The World Bank estimates that 30 to 40 percent of farmers are in unfavorable and insecure tenancy relationships.*
 - *Small-scale violence associated with land and sharecropping disputes is chronic in rural areas, according to US Embassy reporting.*
 - *Villagers often must occupy unsafe land, where they are threatened by flooding, cyclonic winds, and tidal waves. Health workers, for example, estimated overall mortality in the area devastated by the 1970 cyclone—the worst ever—at 20 percent. Mortality in some villages on islands in the Bay of Bengal reached 100 percent.*
 - *In the absence of sanitation systems, rural crowding contaminates water and soil and causes endemic health problems.* 25X1
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Table 2
Bangladesh: Rural Population, 1974 and 1981

Division	Census Population (<i>thousands</i>)		Percent Rural		Number of Villages	
	1974	1981	1974	1981	1974	1981
Total	71,479	87,051	90.9	89.4	68,385	85,650
Chittagong	18,636	22,565	92.2	90.6	18,485	21,086
Dhaka	21,316	26,249	85.7	83.4	19,255	25,169
Khulna	14,195	17,150	92.3	91.3	12,789	13,369
Rajshahi	17,332	21,087	94.7	93.9	17,856	26,026

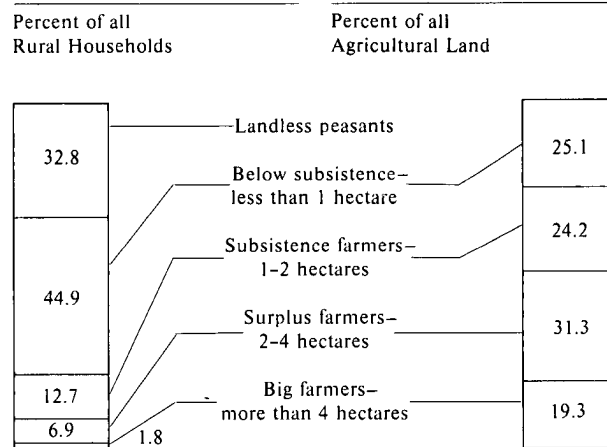
in any case, will be difficult to administer and enforce.

Urbanization: Gathering Momentum

Urbanization is emerging as a potentially serious problem for the government. With only about 11 percent of the population living in urban areas, according to preliminary data from the 1981 census, Bangladesh still ranks among the least urbanized nations in the world. Recent demographic studies, however, show that urbanization in Bangladesh is increasing in intensity:

- The urban population is increasing more than twice as fast as the population as a whole. The United Nations estimates that it grew by 6.7 percent annually during 1975-80.
- The urban population increasingly is concentrated in the largest cities. In 1981 the 13 cities with populations of 100,000 or more accounted for nearly 74 percent of the total urban population, compared to 56 percent in 1974. Dhaka, the capital, more than doubled in population during 1974-81 to reach about 3.4 million, according to census data, while Chittagong, the second-largest city, now has a population exceeding 1.4 million (table 3).
- Rural-to-urban migration is a key factor in urban growth. During 1961-74, according to census statistics, migration from the countryside and reclassification of villages as towns accounted for about 70 percent of the urban increase. No comparable data are available so far from the 1981 census.

Figure 3
Bangladesh: Land Tenure, 1977



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- Surveys by Bangladeshi scholars indicate that a high proportion of migrants to urban areas are young adult males who expect to find employment. Not only are wages in urban industry about 50 percent higher than in agriculture, according to US Embassy reporting, but potential family income is greater because wives and children are more likely to find opportunities to earn cash income.

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Table 3
Bangladesh: Cities With Populations
of 100,000 or More, 1981

City	Population (<i>thousands</i>)		Average Annual Rate of Growth (<i>percent</i>)	Rank	
	1974	1981		1974	1981
Dhaka	1,680	3,459	10.3	1	1
Chittagong	944	1,388	5.5	2	2
Khulna	437	623	5.1	3	3
Rajshahi	133	172	3.6	4	4
Sylhet	59	167	14.7	17	5
Barisal	98	159	6.9	5	6
Rangpur	73	156	10.9	11	7
Jessore	76	149	9.6	8	8
Saidpur	90	128	5.0	6	9
Comilla	86	126	5.4	7	10
Mymensingh	76	108	5.0	9	11
Sirajganj	74	104	4.8	10	12
Pabna	62	101	6.9	14	13
Total, cities of 100,000 or more	3,890	6,841	8.1		
Total urban population	6,977	9,271	10.3		
Share of 100,000+ cities in total urban population				55.8	73.8

Village housing in Sylhet dis-
trict



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Consequences of rapid growth in Dhaka: houses built on stagnant water, sampans used as floating homes



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- These surveys also indicate that the higher standard of living in urban areas attract migrants. Social amenities, health care facilities, and institutes of higher and vocational-technical education are concentrated in urban centers.

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The Employment Challenge

We expect Bangladesh to continue to experience major unemployment problems. Unemployment and underemployment currently affect about 30 percent of the labor force, according to World Bank estimates. The number of relatively politicized and unemployable youths with liberal arts rather than technical degrees is on the rise in urban areas, according to Embassy reporting. Government efforts to deal with unemployment and underemployment will be confounded by the expected addition, according to World Bank estimates, of 18.7 million persons during the 1980s to an already large, mostly rural, uneducated, and unskilled labor pool (see table 4 and figure 4).

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Although the small and almost entirely unionized industrial work force has been relatively unaffected by unemployment so far, we concur with the US Embassy's judgment that the return of important industries to the private sector, announced in June 1982, soon will lead to the release of redundant and surplus workers as entrepreneurs seek to make their enterprises profitable.

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Table 4
Bangladesh: Labor Force Characteristics

Employment by sector, 1983
(World Bank)

Sector	Employees (thousands)	Percent of Total
Total	32,500	100.0
Agriculture	24,000	73.8
Services	5,000	15.4
Industry	3,500	10.8

Industrial employment, April 1983
(Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics)

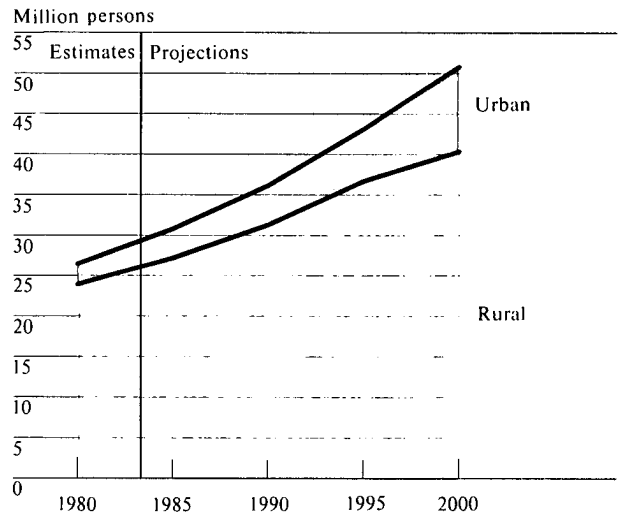
Industry	Employees (thousands)	Percent of Total
Total	1,502	100.0
Jute	153	10.2
Tea	120	8.0
Textiles	75	5.0
Food processing	46	3.1
Chemicals and metals	38	2.5
Paper	12	0.8
Transport	12	0.8
Other	1,046	69.6

Employment status of rural labor force, 1980
(Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics)

Status	Percent of Rural Labor Force	
	Male	Female
Total	100.0	100.0
Wage workers	12.2	24.1
Casual laborers	31.3	30.3
Self-employed	35.6	15.3
Unpaid family workers	20.8	30.3

We believe that urban unemployment presents a potential threat to regime stability, particularly if opposition politicians forge an alliance with restive students (leftist students protesting martial law rioted in Dhaka in February of this year) and industrial workers. An official in Bangladesh's National Security Intelligence told Embassy officials that there is

Figure 4
Bangladesh: Labor Force Estimates and Projections, 1980-2000



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considerable Soviet interest in encouraging leftist political parties, student activists, and industrial workers to confront the government. According to this official, a number of leftist politicians and groups who participated in demonstrations against the government in late November received funding and guidance from the Soviets.

The Double-Edged Sword of Emigration

Emigration: A Safety Valve. Bangladesh's neighbors, who have their own population problems and budget constraints, view real and potential emigration with increasing concern. The stream of thousands of refugees from rural Bangladesh since independence, in addition to the influx of about 10 million refugees in 1971, has already complicated Dhaka's relations with

Bangladesh: Emigration Issues

Emigration from Bangladesh has several causes: population transfers following the civil war; poor economic conditions at home; and perceived discrimination against the Hindu, Bihari, and tribal minorities. Each of Bangladesh's neighbors faces a different aspect of the emigration problem. []

India

India has borne the brunt of emigration from Bangladesh. In 1971, in the turmoil surrounding Bangladesh's independence, about 10 million refugees flooded into India's northeastern states during a nine-month period. At that time, India accommodated the refugees without large-scale incidents. Then Prime Minister Gandhi made clear that the refugees would not be allowed to stay, dampening the hopes of many who might otherwise have settled in India. The bulk of the refugees were repatriated when Pakistani troops surrendered. []

Since 1971 all the northeastern states have felt the impact of comparatively low-level illegal emigration from Bangladesh, which continues to be one of the most intractable problems in Indo-Bangladesh relations. Early migration focused on West Bengal, but as security measures tightened there, migration into Assam, Tripura, Meghalaya, and other northeastern states accelerated. One Western scholar has estimated the number of Bangladeshi migrants going into Assam since 1971 at more than 600,000; into Meghalaya, more than 300,000; and into Tripura, more than 200,000. In 1979 a new migration numbering in the thousands of Magh and Chakhma tribals from the Chittagong Hill Tracts (Ramgarh, Rangamati, and Bandarban Districts) began filtering into Mizoram Union Territory. A majority of the refugees are Hindus—as attested by the decline of Bangladesh's Hindu population over three decades from 18 to 10 percent of the total population—but at least a fourth of them, especially those going to Assam, are Muslims. []

Pakistan

The outstanding migration issue between Pakistan and Bangladesh concerns the Biharis, an Urdu-speaking group that is Bangladesh's largest minority, numbering about 250,000, according to US Embassy estimates. At the time of partition in 1947, thousands of Muslim Biharis migrated along with Muslim Bengalis from India to what is now Bangladesh. Following independence, in 1973-74, about 150,000 Bangladeshis stranded in Pakistan were returned to Bangladesh, while Pakistan was to accept repatriated West Pakistanis and Biharis who did not wish to remain in Bangladesh. During 1979-80 about 10,000 Biharis certified as acceptable by Pakistani authorities were transferred to Pakistan. According to Embassy reporting, another 4,500 Biharis were resettled in Pakistan during 1982. []

Burma

We believe cultural affinity makes Burma a prime potential recipient of refugees from the adjacent Chittagong Hill Tracts, where the government policy of resettling ethnic Bangladeshis has sparked an insurgency among the approximately 500,000 mostly Buddhist tribal people. We believe that the tribals will be outnumbered rapidly at present rates of settlement and that, combined with government efforts to put down the insurgency, this will continue to contribute to the tribal refugee movement. Although there has been no significant flow of migrants into Burma so far, increased security along the Indo-Bangladesh border could make Burma a more accessible refuge. []

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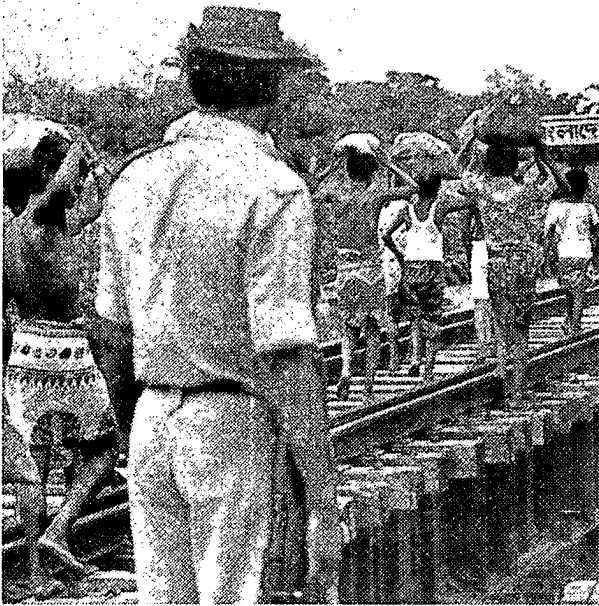
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Would-be Bangladeshi immigrants being turned back by Indian Border Security Forces at Gede in Nadia, West Bengal State.

Table 5
Bangladesh: Official Figures on Workers Abroad

Destination	Number of Workers as of March 1983	Percent of All Bangladeshi Workers Abroad
Total	248,407	100.0
Saudi Arabia	57,549	23.2
United Arab Emirates	41,418	16.7
Iraq	37,130	14.9
Oman	33,986	13.7
Kuwait	26,869	10.8
Qatar	21,542	8.7
Libya	15,132	6.1
Bahrain	8,278	3.3
Singapore	2,288	0.9
Other	4,215	1.7

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New Delhi. Dhaka has shown little interest in stemming this comparatively low-level stream of migrants, possibly because it eases, however slightly, the government's burden of providing for the population. Following violence between native Assamese and Bangladeshis in early 1983, India announced plans to fence its 4,750-kilometer-long border with Bangladesh. Squabbling over the migration issue could sour Indo-Bangladesh negotiations on other fronts—particularly the important negotiations on the use of water from the rivers the two countries share.²

We expect that Dhaka's continued encouragement of manpower migration to the Middle East will not ease demands for jobs or direct migration flows into economically beneficial channels. According to official government figures, as of March 1983 only about 248,000 Bangladeshis—less than 0.1 percent of the labor force—were working abroad (table 5). We believe that in the near term the demand for Bangladeshi laborers, most of whom are unskilled, will decline

in the major labor-importing countries of the Middle East. (Currently, about 80 percent of Bangladeshi workers abroad are employed in Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Iraq, Oman, and Kuwait. All but Oman have seen declining growth in their expatriate labor forces, either as a deliberate policy or because of economic downturn.)

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Although we do not believe that a shrinking of the Middle East labor market alone would seriously affect internal stability, coupled with the stemming of migration to India it would complicate Dhaka's efforts to provide employment. We expect labor migration to remain important principally as a major source of foreign exchange—an estimated \$480 million in 1983, or about half of all foreign currency earnings, according to US Embassy reporting.

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Emigration: A Nightmare. In our judgment, the potential for large-scale emigration to neighboring countries is the aspect of Bangladesh's population pressures that poses the most serious threat to regional stability. Given the normal hardships of life in overcrowded rural Bangladesh, we believe that widespread natural disaster or food shortage could cause the rural masses to simply pack up and leave. Recent disturbances and protests in Dhaka and other major cities against martial law raise at least the specter of a breakdown in law and order that could spread to the countryside and prompt a mass exodus. []

India, the most likely recipient of Bangladeshi refugees, would not tolerate a mass immigration even a fraction of the size of the massive 1971 movement. If such a flow were to develop, or even if New Delhi believed conditions in Bangladesh would stimulate one, we believe it would feel compelled to intervene. In that event, we believe it possible that other countries, such as China and Pakistan, would view with alarm such a demonstration of Indian hegemony and might also become involved in regional conflict. []

Struggling for a Long-Term Solution:

The Family Planning Program

President Ershad has declared that control of rapid population growth is the "number one priority" of his government "as a matter of national survival." The government faces formidable challenges in fostering continuity in the family planning program, acquiring the necessary technical and financial assistance, and finding a successful formula for delivery of family planning services at the grassroots level. We believe that the government also faces potential short-term political risks in convincing couples of the personal and national benefits of a family planning program that will pay off only over the long haul:

- **Opposition on religious grounds.** In a country that is 90-percent Muslim, the accusation that family planning is anti-Islamic is an ever-present risk and is potentially exploitable by political opponents. Although family planning programs and their supporters so far have not been subjected to charges of being anti-Islamic, Ershad is aware of the religious factor and has described to Western population experts some successful efforts to enlist the support of imams, or Muslim religious leaders, for population programs, according to Embassy reporting.

- **Persistence of traditional values.** We believe that government actions to upgrade women's status and educational levels and to involve women as leaders in family planning programs at the village level will strain traditional social structures and put added stress on government resources. Traditional aspects of Bangladesh culture—the low status of women, their low educational levels, their early age at marriage, and a preference for many sons—encourage continued high fertility.

- **Rural factionalism.** The increased participation of local leaders in family planning programs—an essential ingredient of successful programs in other Third World countries—may, in Bangladesh, widen the gap between the rural elite and peasants. The elites, according to a survey of rural leaders, see a need for family planning for the rural poor, but not for themselves. []

Outlook

Despite the government's public commitment to reducing population growth, we believe that Dhaka may have little choice but to divert its attention and resources from the treatment of the root cause of Bangladesh's demographic crisis—rapid population growth—to treat its more politically pressing symptoms, such as unemployment and the growth of urban slums. The regime's overriding concerns lie in ensuring political stability and its own continuation in power. Demographic problems do not yield to quick fixes: the payoff of expensive and socially sensitive programs to lower substantially population growth rates often is not apparent for a decade or more. []

We believe the government is committed to reducing population growth, and we expect it to continue to search for a successful formulation of the family planning program. We do not, however, foresee the regime advancing politically risky programs that would cause sweeping social change, even though such changes have proved decisive in lowering fertility in the few Muslim countries such as Indonesia that have achieved success. []

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We expect, therefore, that Bangladesh's mounting demographic and social problems, which in turn impede the country's development and contribute to political instability, will continue at present or heightened levels at least into the early part of the next century. We believe that there are a number of developments that could initiate a change from chronic social instability to widespread social and political disruption:

- Failure or inability of the government to respond adequately to recurring but unpredictable natural disasters.
- Inability of the rapidly increasing poor population to obtain food, even if grain self-sufficiency is achieved.
- Exploitation of disgruntled industrial workers and unemployable educated urban youths by opposition politicians.
- A greatly increased flow of rural poor into the cities and the consequent pressure on already inadequate urban services.

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Implications for the United States

Population growth will continue to be an important issue in US-Bangladesh relations. The United States, which is one of Bangladesh's leading aid donors, contributed \$24.8 million to the population control effort alone in 1983—its largest single contribution to family planning programs anywhere. We believe, as experience in other developing countries has shown, that heavy US financial and technical support will be necessary for many years before population growth will be reduced substantially. Although total official aid flows from international and bilateral sources to Bangladesh already exceed \$1.5 billion, we believe that the country's leadership will be forced increasingly to look for economic assistance to develop what is one of the most impoverished nations in the world.

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In our judgment, if Bangladesh's population problems lead to mass migration to neighboring countries, particularly to India, it would cause serious deterioration in regional relations and make it difficult for the United States to protect its interest in maintaining stability in South Asia. In a worst case scenario, India's almost certain intervention to stop the refugee flow might result in regionwide conflict.

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